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ABSTRACT

Statistics from several southern states show that African American high school students fail their regents writing exams at a considerably higher rate than do white students. A study evaluated failing regents essays written by African American high school students in several states to determine what the source of their failure was. Results showed that black English vernacular accounted for only 15% of the surface errors. Scorers of the exams most commonly cited the essays' failure to provide adequate support for their arguments. They found the essays either illogical, insufficient, unfocused, unclear or repetitious. Therefore, writing teachers have to entertain the notion that development is a co-conspirator or co-operant in the failure. What can be done to improve the performance of African-American students? The answer is not more drilling of mechanics but some attempt to help them develop a voice in writing. Having been tracked into less demanding classes, they are simply not writing enough. Peter Elbow defines voice as what most people have in their speech but lack in their writing; it brings life to writing; it has the texture and sound of "you." For African-Americans students, finding voice in "talk" or orality has never been a problem. Excerpts from a student's paper show that a real voice resides there. (Two tables of data are included.) (TB)

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Dissin' the Dialectic on Discourse Surface Differences

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At the 1993 4C's Conference, I attended a session on dialect differences in the multicultural classroom where participants from Georgia shared the disproportionate failure rate of African-American students on the Regent's Essay Exam. They also shared problems of dialect and problems instructors had created in trying to correct them. I remember exclaiming, "I think it's time for us to move the dialog about writing failures of African-American students beyond dialectical and surface differences. "Drawing on my dissertation study of African-American male student writers and saluting the contributions that linguists such as Labov, Heath, and Smitherman have made to the field of composition, I added, "Dialect interference just does not seem to be a major cause of their writing failure. While many use Black English frequently in speech, they may not use the same expressions or may use them sparingly in writing."

Leaving the session, I pondered whether I had been presumptuous in challenging us to move the dialectic beyond dialect and surface differences. From recent textual studies, I was fairly certain that Black English Vernacular was not the reason for their failure. Miriam Chaplain (1988), Jane Zenis and Joan Thomas (1990), and Lynn Tuttle (1993) had all analyzed BEV features in Black Student Essays and concurred that there were only a few features such as the omission of singular *-s*, past tense *-ed*, and possessive *-'s* that showed up often in their writing. None of the features was used enough to conclude that BEV features would be the source of their writing failure. However, the only way that I could be certain that the dialectic could go beyond the surface level was to conduct further research—examine failing essays analytically.

I began my research by ascertaining how many states in the Southern Region (where I lived/worked) administered area-competency tests to students in public higher education. There are four (4). In Florida, the exam is called the College-Level Academic Skills Test, (CLAST); in Georgia and Tennessee, it is the Regent's Exam; and in Texas, it is the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP). In some cases these tests are used for placement, and in others, they are used for degree requirements. So whether it is the Regents, the CLAST, or the TASP—all are mandatory for public higher education students to pass. In addition, sports-minded students who don't pass can be denied participation in the NCCA.

The 1992-93 statewide results for first timers on the essay exam displayed a consistent pattern. In Florida nearly 31,000 white students took the CLAST and 93% of them passed; a little over 5,000 black students took the test and 76% passed. In Texas, nearly 52,000 whites took the TASP, and 90% passed; while 7,000 Blacks took it and about 70% passed. According to personnel at the Georgia State Department, results are no longer reported by comparing school performance, race, and gender. Each school, however, gets a copy of its performance. For three predominantly black institutions, the results for the test given in the Summer '92, which none of the students had taken before, were as follows: At Albany State, 41 students took the test, 40% passed; Atlanta Metro, 39 took it, 36% passed; and at Fort Valley, 45 took it and 27% passed. Finally, consider the placement exam required by The Tennessee Board of Regents to assess students' readiness for college-level courses. In 1990 nearly 13% of white students and 35% of the black students were placed in a developmental writing course. In all states, scores from the two-year institutions lowered the state's over all performance in writing, but passing rates for African-American students clearly trail those for their white counterparts on writing tests by about twenty percentage points.

With this knowledge as a backdrop, I decided to conduct an analytical textual study on failed essays of African-American student writers to determine whether nonstandard surface features—which would include BEV features—were the most probable cause of failing essays. And if nonstandard features were not responsible for the bulk of the failure, I wanted to know what else was going on in their compositions. Since my own state of North Carolina does not have a state-wide college competency testing program, I obtained from the Florida State Education Department 25 failing essays written by African American students for the 1993 administration. I typed the essays, omitting all nonstandard surface features including BEV features. After printing all the fixed essays (as I referred to them), I reinserted all surface features where they originally occurred (unfixed category) and printed a second copy of each paper. These two type-written versions of each paper were scored holistically by two scorers according to Florida's rubric. To pass, each essay had to receive a combined score of 6 from the two scorers. I told my scorers that there were two versions of each essay but asked them not to compare the versions.

On the "fixed version" of each paper, I also asked scorers to write or record the reason(s) for the scores they gave. If any of these papers failed, I wanted to see if there was any consistent reason given for this by the scorers.

Analysis

Table 1 shows the types of surface features I eliminated from papers. The number of features each writer used and the sums for each feature are also included. Black English Vernacular features are labeled with an asterisk. They accounted, as I had expected, for only fifteen percent of the total number of nonstandard surface features (543). Table 2 gives the Florida scores (i.e., the scores given by raters in Florida who had originally evaluated the papers),

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and the individual and combined scores for both unfixed (papers with surface errors and BEV features) and fixed papers (without surface errors and BEV features).

To be used in my additional analyses, papers had to get a combined score of six (6). Also, papers were not counted if scores differed between scorers by more than one point or a clear score of 6 could not be determined. Therefore, in the fixed set, the set that is germane to this analysis, Papers 2860, 0106, 2819, and 1054 were eliminated.

In the sixteen remaining papers nine or 45 percent of the unfixed papers passed with a score of 6 or more, and seven or 35 percent of the 16 failed in spite of removing the surface errors. Most interesting, however, was that the largest number of surface errors and BEV features had been removed from the failing papers. The T-test on the variance of scores show that students who passed after surface errors were removed had made no more surface errors than students who failed after surface errors were removed.

Can the dialectic move beyond surface features and failure? I say, "Yes." Even though the sample is too small to generalize to the whole population, the data suggest that surface features alone did not account for their writing failure. Insight is provided by the scorers' comments. Throughout, they refer to the lack of support; it was either illogical, insufficient, unfocused, unclear, repetitious, or rambling. Therefore, writing teachers have to entertain the notion that development is a co-conspirator or a co-operant in the failure. (Typing the papers may also have been a factor, but this would need further investigation.)

Whether surface features or errors in development, both problems indict the teaching of writing. We still have too many inexperienced writers; those students of whom Mina Shaugnessey says,

> [They] write the way they do, not because they are slow or nonverbal, indifferent to or incapable of academic excellence, but because they are beginners and must, like beginners, learn by making mistakes . . . . (5)

But why are there still so many beginning writers in higher education today? After all, thirty years ago the traditional system of separate white and black schools was dismantled to allow African-American children equal access to the kinds of instruction that white students had always been privy to. During the thirty-year integration period, however, the most demoralizing and horrific educational system evolved. African-American students, African-American males, particularly, as well as other minorities, were being tracked from preschool through high school in the less demanding courses, making the worst academic grades (Reed 1988). I set the context here to say that those African-American students who make it to college are already behind their white counterparts in *Western school* literacy skills.

What then can we do at the college level to bridge the academic

Table 1. Summary of types and numbers of surface errors.
(Last five papers were used as consensus markers. *Stands for BEV features.)

										*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*				
	Hyph	Sp	W D	Punc	Cap	ROS	Verb	Abbr	P Ref	Verb Subj	-s 3rd	-'s	-s P +s P Plur	Tens -ed	It	Be	D Neg Subj	Frag	Adj/ Adv	Omis
5073		4		7	2								+s 1							
0755	2	12	1	12	8	7	7			1			−s 2 +s 1	1						1
5323		4		6	1	2	2			2	3	2	-s 5			2		1	1	2
5188		6		6	1	2	1													2
1048				7		3	1				1	1	-s 1 +s 4					4	1	
3222		3		7		2			1											
1043		1		1	1		1		1	1			1 P							
2860	1	1		2	1		2		2	1	3	2							1	1
0106	1	10	2	9	1	4	1							1				1	1	3
5414		2		4																
4101	2	2	2	19	1		1					1	-s 1		1					3
2819	1	4		7	2								-s 2							
0756	1	5		7	1	3		1		3	1	2	-s 2						1	
5114		4		5	2			1			2		-s 1					1		
3226		4	4	15	2	9				4		2	-s 1	4			1	1	1	2
0683		1	2	15		1						1	+s 3	3				4	1	3
0753		1		3	6	8	1					1	-s 2	1				1		3
2862	3	5		2									-s 1 , +s 1							
1054		3	2	6		2				1			-s 1 +s 1	2				1		2
2824	1	4	1	2		1					1		-s 2			1				1
1040		10	1	8	3	1	1	1			1		-s 4 +s 1							
0832		1		1		1	1													1
0931		1		2		1														
0921	1	3		5						2										
0669		2		10	2	4						2				1		1		
Tot	13	93	15	168	34	51	19	3	4	15	12	14	38	12	1	4	1	15	7	24

literacy gap created by years of educational neglect? The answer is not more emphasis on the basics, if by basics we mean more drills on surface errors. We must get them, along with other inexperienced writers, WRITING MORE, and I believe, more writing will come in the multicultural, multi-ethnic composition classes of the 21st century first by coming to voice—a recognition of one's own voice and then assimilating other voices.

Bell Hooks posits in her feminist treatise, *Talking Back*, that ". . . the idea of finding one's voice or having a voice assumes a primacy in talk, discourse, writing, and action" (12). For African-American students, finding voice in *talk* or orality has never been a problem (Gill 227). They come from communities of talkers whose heritage stretches back as far as the African folk tales, myths, storytelling, praise songs, and the proverbs. Ngugu's and Achebe's novels reify and verify this rich tradition. The oral tradition (talk) is preserved today in the diaspora through preaching, storytelling, "signifying," "rapping," "dozens," and downright extreme exaggerations (just plain lies and "jive"). In her article, "The African-American Student: At Risk," Linda Gill posits that African-Americans must learn that they can be equally as powerful with their written voices, and I agree.

Peter Elbow defines voice as what most people have in their speech but lack in their writing; it brings life to writing; it has the texture and sound of you. It distinguishes you, like your real voice does in speech, from anyone else (288). Again, I quote Ma Bell:

Those passages [in *Talking Back*] where I was speaking most directly to black women contained the voice I felt to be most truly mine—it was then that my voice was daring, courageous. When I thought about audience—the way in which the language we choose to use declares who it is we place at the center of our discourse—I confronted my fear of placing myself and other black women at the speaking center" (15).

The following excerpts from the Florida student essays show what happens to voice when inexperienced writers do not confront their fear of audience:

(1)

One may have to give up many pleasurable things, such as going to the movies in order to spend time at the home or nursing home. The need to apply common sense and even some obtained knowledge may arise in a given situation. Therefore, suggesting that not only physical, but mental labor can be involved.

After all the negative arguments are viewed, the positive and life changing facts outweigh everything else. . . On the surface, the sight of negative connotations may not be seen.

(2)

In today's society a place that appeals to my personal interests is the state of Florida. As a child I always wanted to live and die in the state of Florida because it was a melting pot for all people within the United States. As a result, it has the best tourist attraction that most people have seen their entire life. This state provides me with opportunities for beginning my career within the business prospective. . . First, as I start to build my foundation toward my future in

Table 2.

Analysis of Scores

ID#	Florida Score	Gender	Unfixed Papers Scorers A	B	Total	Fixed Papers Scorers A	B	Total
5073	5	M	2	5	7	3	3	6
0755	4	F	1	1	2	3	3	6
5323	5	F	2	1	3	3	3	6
5188	3	M	3	2	5	3	2	5
1048	5	F	3	4	7	4	4	8
3222	5	F	3	4	7	3	4	7
1043	4	F	3	3	6	2/3	4	6/7
2860	3	M	2/3	3	5/6	2	5	7
0106	4	M	2	2	4	2	4	6
5414	5	F	5	2	7	4	3	7
4101	5	M	2	3	5	2	3	5
2819	5	F	2	2	4	3	1	4
0756	5	F	4	3	7	4	4	8
5114	4	F	2	3	5	2	3	5
3226	2	F	2	1	3	2	2	4
0683	5	M	2	1	3	2	1	3
0753	4	F	2	2	4	1	2	3
2862	5	M	4	5	9	5	4	9
1054	5	M	2	3	5	3/4	2	5/6
2824	5	F	2	2	4	2	3	5

Florida, I have to get involved within the community where I stay and the people in the surrounding areas. . .

Both writers begin with their own voices, but suddenly they change their diction, losing their voices—a firm indication that they no longer write for the same audience. These are cases where "the illusion of authorial sovereignty [is so strong that] it is difficult for these writers to acknowledge the inevitable immersion of their voices in the flow of difference" (Crowley 35). So they reach toward a voice which they think the test givers want in order to sound sophisticated and pass the test.

To further exacerbate the situation, some other basic writers have little notion of what the academic *written* voice demands. They omit necessary evidence that would easily have been supplied by interruption if the reader had been an auditor. Deborah Tannen calls this writing technique "contextualization" because things are counted upon to mean only through nonverbal behaviors, paralinguistic cues or retelling as in the piece below:

(3)

. . . Going to the beach alone is great if you want to vent frustration, think about what you did and why you did it or to clear your mind. Throwing rocks into the ocean is great for venting frustration; after you are finished, you need to sit down and think about the reasons for your actions earlier.

The beach is a place where if you want romance you are at the right spot. When you go out there, make sure you have your wine, candle lights and some soft music. With these three you cannot go wrong.

I am confident that this writer understands the expository structure in that the essay identifies three appeals the beach has for him. He hasn't had enough practice, however, with writing to include the abundant, specific examples/details necessary to argue his assertions. He really has not needed to know the specifics, for in face-to-face involvement when the listener needs to know more, she simply asks. In this essay the reader is left to fill in the missing text.

Though one of our main goals as writing theorists is to help students master the conventions and voice of the professional discourse communities, I believe we can if we allow them opportunity to play around, discover their own voices first.

Here's a writer who maintained voice throughout the essay.

(4)

First, i admire the colors of the runners uniforms. They are all crafted to blend with the event. Then the runners began to warm up; as if it was the only thing they have lived for. After the warm up, they position themselves at the starting lines. the gun sounds and they are off. The sudden jolt in forward motion like a bullet from a gun. Legs, arms, and mind are now working together for one common goal. That is to reach to the finish line firts. . . .

Though the whole essay contains thirty surface mistakes, a real writer resides here; the voice is one who knows and understands track and field from the starting block.

Finding this kind of voice demands that we free writing and students from shackles. Kurt Lewin's explains Richard Rorty's definition of knowledge by saying you can't teach a group of watchmakers to become carpenters simply by showing them how to use a hammer and saw: "They have to learn to swear like carpenters, drink like carpenters, walk, eat, and make love like carpenters." I don't know about allowing students to make love like writers, but we must allow them to write like writers. We must proactively involve them, which means that we can no longer set the writing agenda. Students who are inexperienced writers must be allowed their own intervention processes by establishing their own modes, topics, audiences, and purposes. They must write about subjects on which they are authorities—how else could the track writer have known that legs, arms, mind all move and work together for a common goal.

In addition to helping our students find voice, we must also give TIME and opportunity for revising, with good feedback, but first ESTABLISH VOICE. Moreover, they need our instruction at need. How much more energy a collaborative group invests in learning about proposal writing and proposal development when group members work with a real audience who is eagerly awaiting their resolves and recommendations—a lot more because the need to know is greater.

To discontinue the writing failure syndrome, African-American students must write more and teachers must create a "class act" that privileges voice and provides helpful feedback. Many Africans were denied their real voices during their childhoods, and, as a result, African writers today argue about which language to use—their indigenous languages or those of the colonizers. The African language question clearly depicts a neverending saga of voices enslaved. Therefore, when I think of their dilemma, I am convinced that our classrooms must be places where a collation of voices sing harmoniously.

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